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# Music as Concept and Practice in the Late Middle Ages\*

Reviewed by Peter M. Lefferts

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*Music as Concept and Practice in the Late Middle Ages*, edited by Reinhard Strohm and Bonnie J. Blackburn. The New Oxford History of Music, 2d Edition. Vol. 3, Pt. 1. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). xxxii, 460 p. ISBN 0–198–16205–7. \$115. Music examples, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index.

The six volumes of the original *Oxford History of Music* (1901–5), after their second edition (1929–38), were eventually superseded by the ten volumes of *The New Oxford History of Music* (*NOHM*), a project that from inception to completion took about half a century, with volumes appearing every few years from 1954 to 1990. Even before completion of *NOHM*, new editions of some of its earliest and most outdated volumes were being planned. The first of these, a new version of volume 2, was started in 1977 and published thirteen years later (*The Early Middle Ages to 1300*, ed. Richard Crocker and David Hiley [New York: Oxford University Press,

1990]). The book under review here, intended at first as a direct replacement for volume 3 (*Ars Nova and the Renaissance (1300–1540)*, ed. Dom Anselm Hughes and Gerald Abraham [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960]), but now under a new title, had an equally extended genesis, from planning initiated in 1988 to publication in 2001.

The path to completion was not a smooth one. As coeditor Reinhard Strohm explains in the introduction, “A total of seventeen entirely new chapters on contrasted fields of music were commissioned from specialists” on a variety of mainstream and novel topics (p. xxvi). I imagine the result would have been a volume of considerable heft, something along the lines of the 935 pages of *NOHM 9 (Romanticism (1830–1890))*, ed. Gerald Abraham [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990]). In the end, however, only eight chapters were submitted, and none of these could be called mainstream. The decision was made to publish this “torso of a book” (p. xxvi), lopsided but not by design. Strohm’s description of its contents in the introduction is his own mini-review, studded with wry humor, subtle implication, and gentle irony—an attempt “to make a virtue of the insufficiencies of the book, and [almost praising] the contribution of those who did not contribute” (p. xxxi). By calling it *NOHM 3*, 2d edition, part 1, Oxford University Press obviously has left the door open for the commissioning, writing, and publishing some clay of a part 2, which would presumably provide the opportunity to present more traditional narratives of composers, institutions, national schools, styles, and genres of western European music from the age of Machaut through the age of Josquin.

So what, then, do we actually find in the volume at hand? To begin with, unlike its predecessor (*NOHM 3*), this volume

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has only two geographically circumscribed essays. One, by Amnon Shiloah, is on the musical cultures of Muslims and Jews in Spain over the eight centuries from the conquest in the year 711 to the successful conclusion of the Reconquista and expulsion of the Jews in 1492. The other, by Tom R. Ward, deals with the development during the fifteenth century of institutions and musical activities devoted to high musical culture in that part of south central Europe which encompassed Germany, Austria, Poland, Bohemia, and Moravia.

A panoramic overview of music in the culture of Muslim Spain is beyond our grasp. The various written sources are concerned exclusively with the creation of an Andalusian high style of vocal and instrumental music, a distinctive art emerging in the 800s that had its roots in the great musical tradition of the Baghdad caliphates but was indebted for its novelty to the diversified and culturally ambitious society of the court and upper classes in Córdoba and other leading centers in Spain. Our main sources of information are accounts in general histories, and Shiloah provides a critical historiography of these rather than engaging in descriptive speculation about the music itself; that would have to be based on later practices in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. One of the greatest Andalusian achievements of the 900s and 1000s, the invention of new poetic genres—the strophic song forms *muwashshah* (in classical Arabic) and *zajal* (in vernacular Arabic)—is at the center of the continuing controversy about the influence of Muslim Spain upon Romance-language vernacular poetry of the troubadours and trouvères. Shiloah reviews the contesting claims briefly and judiciously without a firm commitment to one or another camp.

Shiloah's treatment of music in the lively Jewish community in Muslim and Christian Spain, and in Provence and Italy after the center of cultural activity moved eastward upon the expulsion in 1492, is equally cautious and constrained by the lack of musical documents. He admits the logic of claims that there might be remnants of the liturgical and folk musics of ancient Israel among the medieval Iberian Jews, but reminds us that these claims cannot be proved convincingly. Similarly, the rich, modern Sephardic folk song tradition has mixed Judaeo-Spanish roots, but the degree to which it reflects the sophisticated secular music of aristocratic circles in Muslim and Christian Spain (in which Jewish musicians were important participants), ancient Jewish folk song, or indigenous medieval Spanish folk song, remains an open question.

The other geographically defined chapter is Tom Ward's contribution on the music of the region east of the Rhine and north of the Alps. The chapter title declares its chronological limits to be "c.1300–c.1520," but it concentrates almost exclusively on the fifteenth century, and so ends up covering one-eighth the time span of Shiloah's essay in almost twice as many pages. Here again the unmodified noun "music" refers to the musical practice of an elite high culture, especially now in regard to the cultivation of polyphony. Such music is composed, performed, and preserved in the precincts of courts, universities, monasteries and churches, and the civic institutions of the leading towns. A statement like the following, "Throughout the second half of the fifteenth century, music making became an ever more broadly practised activity in central Europe" (p. 240), might lead the unwary reader to assume that central Europe was a silent place, barren of all music whatsoever until its educated classes began to import it from

western Europe. That, of course, was not the case, and Ward's essay would have benefitted from a denser contextualization of the music whose history he wants to write within a more inclusive environment of secular and sacred musical activity at all levels of society. The few pages devoted to monophonic and polyphonic secular song are only a token.

Having divested myself of that complaint, I must say that on its own terms this is an extremely valuable chapter. Ward works his way across Austria, Germany, Poland, and Bohemia before and after 1450 in a richly detailed exposition of institutions, patrons, manuscripts, composers and theorists, notation, repertoires, genres, and styles. One is reminded, in fact, of the great synthetic and often path breaking essays of the older *NOHM* 3 on France, Italy, England, and the Netherlands. Ward's evidence convincingly shows fifteenth-century central Europe to be a relatively coherent unit in respect to high musical culture, sharing circumstances and similar developments that transcend the geopolitical and linguistic boundaries within the region. His remarks on music theory are augmented by Bonnie J. Blackburn's complementary survey of German and central European theory later in the volume (pp. 303–9).

An additional six chapters follow topics without regard to geographic constraints; five of them cover all of Europe. Andrew Hughes's "Late Medieval Plainchant for the Divine Office," for instance, ranges from England and France to Germany, Austria, Poland, Bohemia, Sweden, Italy, and Spain. This essay is somewhat of an orphan. Readers familiar with old or new versions of *NOHM* 2 will be surprised to find plain chant revisited in a subsequent volume of the series. Presumably, Hughes's essay had initially been intended to be partnered in this later volume with one or more additional chapters on

sacred and secular monophony after 1300. Standing now alone, it must bear the entire burden for making the case that all over Europe from the 800s to the late 1500s, composers and poets expended more effort on the creation of new plainchants than on any other genre. In service of this thesis, Hughes ingeniously repeats as a leitmotiv throughout his narrative a quotation from Richard Crocker (*NOHM* 2<sup>2</sup>, p. 283) to the effect that chant is "the normal musical expression of the time." Even cautiously granting that point, one might not be ready to agree with Hughes that the music for new Offices, especially those for local feasts and saints, but also including those for new Marian feasts, and for Trinity Sunday and Corpus Christi, for example, is of such a scale that its "geographical and chronological scope dwarfs that of other repertoires, of whatever period" (p. 41). Anyone stimulated to rebut this audacious claim, however, will have to think in as bold and summative a way about the scope of other musical activities over as broad a span—seven centuries—of European history.

This chapter is the longest in the book. In it, Hughes divides his material into three historical periods: the Carolingian Offices from 850 to 950, the Romanesque Offices from 950 to 1150, and new Offices of the era of poetry, from 1100 to 1580, with a sub-period within the latter identified with the rise of new orders (e.g., Cistercians, Dominicans, Franciscans) and uses (e.g., the English Uses of Salisbury, York, and Hereford) from 1100 to 1250. For each period he discusses a number of individual Offices in detail, concentrating on features of textual prosody, melodic facture, and word-music relationships.

The chapters on instrumental music and dance also serve to widen our too often parochial, polyphony-dominated view of

late medieval musical practice. The chapter on “Instrumental Music, c. 1300–c. 1520” by the late Howard Mayer Brown and Keith Polk in this volume, and “Instruments and Instrumental Music Before 1300” by Christopher Page in *NOHM* 2<sup>2</sup> together replace the earlier chapters in *NOHM* 3 by Yvonne Rokseth (“The Instrumental Music of the Middle Ages and Early Sixteenth Century”) and Gerald Hayes (“Musical Instruments”). The collaborative essay by Brown and Polk is an admirable synthesis of present knowledge. Lucid and well-argued, it is the best-written chapter in the book, as it takes up in turn instrumentalists, instrumental music, and instruments and instrumental groupings. The thorough and balanced discussion helpfully points to gaps in our knowledge (e.g., citing our need for comprehensive reviews of the evidence on the fiddle, recorder, and douçaine before 1500). The treatment of many topics, however, leaves the reader wishing for the authors to have been granted double their assigned page length and to have been released from the obligation to close in the early sixteenth century, so that they could spend more time on percussion, on the role of intabulation, on texted monophonic dance songs as sources of instrumental repertory, on the question of accompaniment to fifteenth-century French chansons (*vis-à-vis* the English *a cappella* heresy), on techniques of variation and diminution, on the rise of amateurs, on the rise of families of instruments and unbroken consorts with homogeneity of tone color, and so forth.

Walter Salmen’s rich, relatively brief chapter on dance is the first of its kind in the early music volumes of *NOHM*, and leaves one admiring and wishing for more. In a rapid but thorough overview, Salmen explains that in medieval Europe everyone danced, that dance was a right and a duty, and that dances

had meaning and purpose. He reviews the social, therapeutic, religious, and even cosmic significance of dance, secular and sacred locations for dance, modes of performance (solo, round, and paired dances), dancing masters, dance songs, dance accompaniments, and instrumental dance music. Salmen draws his material principally from German-speaking lands but also introduces evidence that indicates his broader scope of relevance. There is less here on specific surviving repertoires than about the larger contexts into which they fit. I want to hear more, too, about what we know about the specifics of choreographies.

Also path-breaking for *NOHM* are two major chapters on music theory, which together span 1300 to 1545. Jan Herlinger writes on the earlier period up to Ugolino of Orvieto, ca. 1430, and Bonnie J. Blackburn covers the later period from Ugolino to Pietro Aaron. The two authors adopt complementary organizational methods for their material. Herlinger’s broad approach is topical and synthetic, covering fundamentals, mode, counterpoint, mensuration and *musica speculativa*. Within each category he explores not only that which is stable, but also the loci of controversy and change. Blackburn’s largest outline, instead, is geographical and chronological, taking up German and central European theorists of the 1360s to the 1520s, Spanish theorists from Fernand Estevan (1410) to Juan Martínez (1508), and then theorists working in Italy after 1450, whether foreigners (including Bartolomeo Ramos de Pareia, John Hothby, Johannes Tinctoris) or natives (including Gaffurius and Pietro Aaron). For each individual she characterizes the body of work as a whole, with a concentration on “the burning musical questions of the day” (p. 302). These chapters are very useful surveys. The one note of criticism I would sound is that each could

have benefitted from more of the other's organizational method. Thinking in terms of national schools would have broadened and deepened Herlinger's essay. With respect to mensuration, for example, he overlooks the English school altogether, and downplays the complexity of the situation in the Italian school between Marchetto da Padova and Prosdocimus de Beldemandis. A case could also be made for isolating distinctive Anglo-French concerns about tonal behavior. Blackburn's essay, for its part, could have been more topical, following a thread of musical argument through all the pertinent treatises, rather than leaving and returning.

The final chapter of *NOHM* 3<sup>2</sup>, part 1, is an extended consideration by Reinhard Strohm of the notion of a musical "Renaissance" in the fifteenth century. Strohm is not concerned with whether western European musical genres and styles underwent sudden and dramatic change, nor with whether one can associate any musical developments with the rebirth of antiquity. Rather, he explores the origins of the idea of a musical rebirth, and draws the important conclusion that "this idea originated as a by-product of humanist reflections on the arts in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries" (p. 346); whatever the truth of the idea, "its perpetrators have made posterity believe" it happened (p. 388). His primary focal points are Tinctoris and Martin Le Franc, with the latter receiving especially long and detailed scrutiny. Strohm is most concerned with documenting Le Franc's strong humanist credentials, and he postulates that a generation later, the ideas of Le Franc and his circle reached Tinctoris, perhaps directly through a most significant personal intermediary, the composer Guillaume Du Fay. This chapter is an important contribution to the long and controversial literature on its topic.

In sum, this is a valuable book, in which senior scholars approach topics with which they have been closely associated for many years. While its essays vary in their mix of original material and synthesis—and achieve varied success at the subordination of fact to generalization—they are without a doubt the best accounts now of their subject at their length in English. Not the least of the book's virtues is how much one can learn simply from observing how these authors organize and proportion their material within the constraints assigned them. Oxford University Press has permitted generous footnoting, substantial bibliographies assembled at the rear of the volume (up-to-date as of the late 1990s), and good indexing. Moreover, the volume is handsomely produced following the familiar *NOHM* series design, and it has enjoyed excellent copyediting. Its most natural audience will be the more sophisticated upper-level undergraduates and graduate students who are looking for a first orientation to its topics in more detail than that provided either by encyclopedias or by single-volume, single-author period surveys such as those in the Norton Introduction to Music History series. My overriding concern with *NOHM* 3<sup>2</sup>, part 1 is that this book is in danger of being overlooked. It is not going to be a textbook, and its non-mainstream contents (for the most part new to the *NOHM* series), its chronological spread, and its lack of a central focus, all conspire to make it hard to hold in one's head. One is not easily going to remember what is here. And that problem can really only be addressed by those who will seek out and use this book, and transfer what is of interest to them into their personal bibliographies and course syllabi.